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LETTER DATED 9 APRIL 1997 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF CROATIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Upon the instructions of my Government I have the honour to transmit to you herewith statement No. 3 from the Government of Croatia on the documents programme in the Croatian Danube region and on the status of Serbs and other minorities in Croatia.

The statement provides the latest data on the documents programme, which has produced exceptional results. Over the past several months, slightly less than 120,000 residents of the region have received one or more documents that they could use, inter alia, in respect of the elections on Sunday, 13 April. The total number of residents who received documents exceeds most estimates of the present population in the region.

Up to this point, the international community and the Government of Croatia have dedicated outstanding good will and substantial resources in assisting the Serbs in the region to realize the rights enjoyed throughout the war by tens of thousands of Serb citizens of Croatia who did not raise arms against the Government and by all other citizens. The Government hopes that these efforts will not be in vain, and that the Serbs formerly affiliated with the rebel and occupying forces will reject their past policy of ethnic exclusivity and accept living once again with non-Serbs as citizens of Croatia.

From now on, the international community and the Government of Croatia will need to find ways to balance properly the efforts on behalf of the Serbs in the region with the efforts on behalf of 96,000 mostly non-Serb displaced persons and refugees who have been waiting for almost five years to return to their homes in the region. It will be a delicate process of reconciliation between, on one hand, the party formerly affiliated with the aggressor and, on the other, the party that was victimized by the aggressor. The Government of Croatia will look to cooperate with the international community in finding a proper way to harmonize the complex matrix of sometime conflicting interests of the two groups, while focusing its efforts on protecting civil liberties, human and minority rights, as well as maintaining internal security and regional peace and stability.

May I ask for your kind assistance in distributing the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Ivan SIMONOVIC
Permanent Representative

Annex

Statement No. 3 on the documents programme in the Danube region and on the status of Serbs and other minorities in Croatia, 9 April 1997

The Government has issued 348,000 documents to the residents of the Danube region of Croatia, out of 355,446 applications. Only 275 applications have been denied; 7,171 are still in process. The breakdown of document requests, their type and status as of 6 April is as follows:

Documents status	Applications received	Documents issued	Applications denied	Applications in process
Domovnicas[a]	121 202	119 112	0	2 090
Naturalization documents	30 877	30 426	275	176
Identification cards	93 982	60 971 domiciled 32 875 settlers 93 846	0	136
Passports	81 887	81 707	0	180
Birth certificates and other documents	27 498	22 909	0	4 589
Total	355 446	348 000	275	7 171
Percentage of total	100.0	97.9	0.1	2.0

[a] Citizenship certificates.

Slightly less than 120,000 domovnicas that are needed for voter registration have been issued so far. About two thirds have been issued to the pre-war residents of the region, and about on third to persons who moved into the region since 1991. In cases where applicants did not appear on local citizenship registers, or in instances where local registers were missing owing to warfare or theft, the applicants were required to apply for naturalization; 30,426 persons became naturalized citizens. The total number of issued domovnicas compares favourably with estimates of the present population in the region that range from 108,000 to 150,000.

The majority of Serbs, however, are not using their documents to register to vote. Owing to a low registration turnout on the Serb side, the Transitional Administrator had extended the voter registration deadline in the region three times; first from 24 March to 28 March, then to 5 April, and then one more time for special cases to 11 April.

The documents programme has been extremely successful. This is due in part to the tremendous resources the Government has committed to the task. It has opened 25 documentation centres in the region. The offices are open during regular business hours. The processing of applications, however, is done non-stop, in three shifts. Mobile units are used and assigned to offices depending on capacity requirements. Most offices operate with substantial excess capacity.

The documents programme officers have had a number of problems with the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) and local Serb officials in receiving adequate security and resources in the region. Some are excusable under the circumstances. Uncomfortable problems have also arisen owing to aggressive actions by a few UNTAES civilian officers and translators, who choose to act outside of their mandate and contrary to a professional code of conduct.

The number of documents issued is higher than the number of Serb residents in the region since most applicants have applied for and received more than one type of document. Many applicants are non-Serbs. The pre-war population of the Danube region included 67,576 Serbs and 125,937 non-Serbs. Most of the non-Serbs have been ethnically cleansed, and now live in Croatia as displaced persons. In a recent government survey of the displaced persons from the region, only 6 per cent said that they do not want to return.

There has been a lot of speculation about a possible organized Serb exodus, similar to the exodus that took place during the security operation Storm, and during the Implementation Force (IFOR) take-over of Sarajevo. The Government has encouraged the Serbs in the Danube region to stay on numerous occasions, and at various levels. President Franjo Tudjman alone has made six such public overtures to Serbs over the past year, the most recent being on 25 March. The Government has also offered the Serbs minority concessions in its "letter" that other minorities in Croatia severely criticized as excessive. Nevertheless, the Government is aware that some people will leave the region, and in this regard the international community should not discredit its own enormous efforts in the region and the concessions from the Government of Croatia by underestimating the natural consequences of the rebel and occupying policy of ethnic exclusivity pursued through the use of violence.

The Government has been forthcoming to Serbs in other areas as well. It has facilitated the return of 58 per cent of Serbs who fled Croatia and have since made requests to return. As of 12 February, the Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees has registered 14,459 such returns. The remaining requests are being met. Moreover, the situation in the already reintegrated territories has stabilized. The rate of incidents there is not different from the natural rate of incidents in other parts of Croatia. As pointed out in the 5 March report of the Secretary-General, the "majority of reported incidents involve acts of petty crime," (S/1997/195, para. 4). The voluntary return of displaced persons and refugees is of continuing interest to the international community and to the Government of Croatia. With this in mind, a working group, involving the Government, UNTAES and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was formed recently in order to strengthen the return process in both directions. The Government is the only party in the region that

has brought back refugees who were not affiliated with it during the war into its area of control.

An issue that is often ignored by the international community concerns the status of 145,000 Serbs who, over the past five years, have lived in Croatia in areas not affected by war with lives substantially no different that the lives of their non-Serb neighbours. Five members of that community are presently serving in Sabor, three under the minority quota. Two Serb political parties and various other Serb institutions have functioned normally in Croatia throughout the war. Close to 9,000 ethnic Serbs have served in the Croatian armed forces during the war; they were the largest ethnic contingent in the Croatian Army.

Croatia is a multi-ethnic country. In addition to ethnic Serbs, 450,000 other citizens of Croatia declare themselves to belong to a minority group. About 15 per cent of its citizens are minorities, surpassing in this regard most Western European States. Studies by a Western institution have shown that Croats are among the most tolerant of publics in Europe in their views on minorities.